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# ***Wrestling Observer Newsletter***

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## **HISTORY OF PRO WRESTLING IN THE TOKYO DOME**

When the former Soviet Union fell into an economic collapse, a decision was made to raise money by contracting some of their prized athletes out to professional sports organizations.

Before Russians started competing in the NHL, the first deal, which made significant worldwide news, was with New Japan Pro Wrestling in 1988. Masa Saito and Hiroshi Hase, two New Japan wrestlers who had backgrounds as Olympians, were put in charge of training a group of high-level athletes--who had never seen pro wrestling--to become wrestlers in a short period of time.

A year earlier, the Tokyo Dome, the first indoor stadium of its kind, opened. The Dome, with its unique air supported white roof, looked almost like a half egg; hence in its early years, the building was known as The Big Egg, and sometimes, the Egg Dome.

On 1/4, when New Japan runs its 23rd straight January 4th event at the Dome, with the double main event of Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Hiroshi Tanahashi for the IC title and Kazuchika Okada vs. Tetsuya Naito for the IWGP title, it will be the closest thing to the quarter-century anniversary of pro wrestling being held in a building that has housed a majority of the biggest crowds and greatest shows in the history of the genre.

In 1990, 1995, 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2012, shows at the Tokyo Dome won Best show of the year. There is a good chance 2013 will be added to that list. No other building has housed two cards of the year. It would be a joke to even suggest that the No. 1 arena for pro wrestling over the last quarter-century, when it comes to legendary shows and matches, could be anything but the Tokyo Dome.

The Dome was built at the Korakuen Mall, which included an amusement park, restaurants, and not far from Korakuen Stadium, which it replaced as the home of the most famous baseball team in Japan, the Yomiuri Giants. One of the most famous wrestling matches of all-time took place on October 7, 1957, at Korakuen Stadium, where Lou Thesz retained his NWA title going to a 60:00 draw with Rikidozan, in a match that drew an 87.0 rating, the highest rated television show in the history of the country. Literally, an entire nation stood still.

Almost next door to the Dome is Korakuen Hall, a small arena on the fourth floor of a building that is separated from the stadium by only a restaurant, the symbolic home of Japanese pro wrestling since the beginning of time.

After making the deal and training the Russians, New Japan Pro Wrestling announced their debut on the biggest show in the company's 17-year history, "Super Powers Clash," at the Tokyo Dome on April 24, 1989.

While pro wrestling was a popular sport on television that drew solid crowds, the belief was that it was an expensive ticket arena event, not a stadium event. There were a few stadium shows in the 60s, with the last truly big hit being a 1967 match with International champion Giant Baba going to a 66 minute draw with NWA champion Gene Kiniski before 25,720 in Osaka. A show the next year at the stadium with Baba vs. WWWF champion Bruno Sammartino only drew 13,000.

New Japan had a golden era in the early 80s, a period nostalgia so strong for to this day that independent shows featuring Riki Choshu, Tatsumi Fujinami and the Original Tiger Mask, three of the big four of the era (Inoki was the big star, even though younger fans and hardcore fans were more into the Choshu vs. Fujinami matches) are regularly held and do decently well. But a lot of problems affected the product over the next few years.

New Japan's home base for its biggest shows was the 11,066-seat Sumo Hall at Ryogoku, which had been a problem. A riot at a late 1987 show for the debut of Big Van Vader ended up with the company banned from the building for one year. Their first show back, in early

1989, a double main event of a singles battle between the company's two biggest stars, Inoki and Choshu, plus an IWGP title match with Tatsumi Fujinami vs. Sid Vicious, had only drawn 8,000 fans.

The idea of booking the Tokyo Dome for the debut of unknown Russians was not without risk. But they drew a healthy crowd of 43,800 fans and a gate of \$2,781,000, the latter would be a short-lived pro wrestling record, for a 14-match show. It immediately established the giant show concept once a year, or more if the right circumstances fell into place, as opposed to the tradition of a big show at a major arena at the end of every tour, as what you peak for.

The first Dome show featured a one-night tournament for the IWGP heavyweight title, Russian powerhouse wrestler Salman Hashimikov vs. Bam Bam Bigelow, New Japan's star foreign attraction, and a main event where Inoki would face Shota Chochoshvili, a Russian who in 1972 had won an Olympic gold medal in judo. In a match with no ropes around the ring, during the fifth round, Chochoshvili used a series of judo throws, called uranages, and Inoki was knocked out cold. Chochoshvili's pro wrestling career was short-lived--Inoki got his revenge in a rematch a month later. But the main event finish, the uranage, turned out to be a signature worldwide finishing move. It was popularized by Hase in the 90s after being taught it by the Russians, and turned into similar moves called the Rock Bottom and Book End in U.S. pro wrestling.

After the match was over, 73-year-old Thesz, who was on the show as the referee for the IWGP tag team title match, went to Inoki to tell him how proud he was of him as a businessman. In refereeing his match, Thesz met Hase, who is now a Senator in Japan. Thesz raved about him from that point forward, feeling he had a great mind for pro wrestling, was a fantastic in-ring wrestler, but would go on to big things outside of the wrestling. Hashimikov pinned Bigelow in 2:26 and became an instant sensation, having a short run as IWGP champion. Another debuting Russian, Victor Zangiev, a world teenage champion in 1981 and World Cup champion in 1985, became the best performer of the inexperienced crew, and popular enough that he became the prototype of a famous video game character, Zangief, in Street Fighter II. The show also featured the debut of a new character aimed at kids. Keiichi Yamada, known as the Japanese Dynamite Kid, donned a comic book outfit combining the Lion and Tiger, to become Jushin "Thunder" Liger. The idea was to create a character in the mode of the Original Tiger Mask, but for a new generation of fans. Liger pinned Kuniaki Kobayashi, who was Tiger Mask's biggest Japanese rival. Liger, who worked third from the top, and Super Strong Machine, who teamed with George Takano to defend the tag titles, are the two wrestlers who were on the first pro wrestling event at the Tokyo Dome, and will both be on Saturday's show, working the opening veterans nostalgia match.

Another name on the show was Benny "The Jet" Urquidez, a karate fighter turned kickboxing legend and later a well-known actor.

## **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - April 24, 1989**

Super Powers Clash - The Opening act 43,800 fans

Naoki Sano b Hiro Saito

QUARTERFINALS OF ONE-NIGHT TOURNAMENT FOR VACANT IWGP TITLE:

Big Van Vader b Masahiro Chono

Tatsumi Fujinami b Vladimir Berkovich

Victor Zangiev b Buzz Sawyer

Shinya Hashimoto b Riki Choshu

Martial arts match: Benny "the Jet" Urquidez d Shinya Asuka

IWGP TOURNAMENT SEMIFINALS

Big Van Vader b Tatsumi Fujinami

Shinya Hashimoto b Victor Zangiev  
 Wakha Evelev b Masa Saito  
 IWGP TOURNAMENT FINALS: Big Van Vader b Shinya Hashimoto  
 IWGP tag title: Super Strong Machine & George Takano b Hiroshi Hase & Shiro Koshinaka (Lou Thesz referee)  
 Jushin Liger b Kuniaki Kobayashi  
 Salman Hashimikov b Bam Bam Bigelow  
 World Martial Arts championship Judo vs. pro wrestling: Shota Chochoshvili b Antonio Inoki in no rope match to win title

A promotion called the UWF had caught fire at about that time. It appeared what drew fans to pro wrestling was the idea of realism in a world that was anything but. The UWF, a worked promotion that eschewed usual pro wrestling spots, and built around stiff kicks, slaps, suplexes and submissions, had become all the rage. Almost every show was selling out as soon as tickets were put on sale. On November 29, 1989, the Tokyo Dome sold out for the first time, three days after tickets were put on sale, 50,000 tickets sold for a group that didn't even have television, for a show called "U-Cosmos."

The success of the UWF changed Japanese pro wrestling over the next decade. In the 70s and 80s, the business was built around unbeatable superstars. When the top stars squared off, finishes were often double count outs, or disqualifications. The system seemed to be working, as the business was popular and fans were drawn to the larger than life superstars, even if the big match finishes didn't prove anything.

But with the huge demand for UWF tickets, a company promoting realism and clean finishes, the two main promotions at the time, All Japan and New Japan, were suddenly falling behind. Both companies made changes, including booking a more serious wrestling product, and booking clean finishes to almost every match. It worked out great, as All Japan soon began a string of sellouts in Tokyo that lasted many years. New Japan, within a few years, would become the strongest wrestling promotion in the world.

Akira Maeda, the promotion's biggest star, defeated a former European judo champion, Willie Wilhelm from Holland, via submission, in the main event. The show also featured Duane Koslowski of the wrestling Koslowski twins of South Dakota, a member of the 1988 U.S. Olympic team, losing to Nobuhiko Takada in one of Takada's biggest career wins. There were also three pro wrestler vs. kickboxer matches, one of which pitted two men that were going to have notable futures.

In the worked match, the WKA world kickboxing champion, Maurice Smith, who nearly eight years later would beat Mark Coleman in a historically noteworthy match to become the UFC heavyweight champion, knocked out future and current pro wrestling superstar Minoru Suzuki in the fourth round.

New Japan booked the Tokyo Dome for the second time on February 10, 1990, for an event billed as "Super Fight." The original idea for the main event was Ric Flair defending the NWA title against Keiji Muto. But all kinds of problems arose. Flair had an issue of not being paid above his WCW weekly pay for headlining such a big money event. Relations between WCW and New Japan fell apart. With the building booked and no main event, New Japan president Seiji Sakaguchi went to All Japan president Giant Baba and asked for a truce to be called in their long war. By pitting All Japan stars vs. New Japan stars for the first time in more than a decade, plus having the pro wrestling debut of Koji Kitao, the biggest star in sumo as Futuhaguro, the show became the hottest ticket in town. Even though it didn't get near the media publicity of Mike Tyson's fight with Buster Douglas the next night, the 53,900 fans who packed the Dome greatly outdistanced the 30,000 there the next day for one of the biggest and most famous upsets in sports history. While it was a loaded card, to most fans, the real main event saw All Japan's Genichiro Tenryu & Tiger Mask (Mitsuharu Misawa) beating New Japan's Riki Choshu & George Takano via count out. What was notable that for Sakaguchi to get the deal with Baba, in the three-match series between the two

companies, the host company, New Japan, lost two and had one draw. The show became more famous later for a brutal IWGP title match with Vader defending against Stan Hansen—the match where Hansen knocked Vader's eye out of its socket, which became a shocking visual remembered by everyone who saw it. The battle of each company's foreign powerhouse was a big part of drawing the sellout, as was the Kitao debut. Bigelow, in this sense, played the same role in putting over Kitao as he did when putting over Hashimikov on the first Dome show. When the show aired on TV-Arashi on a several day tape delay, it drew a 23.2 rating.

### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - February 10, 1990**

Super Fight - All Japan vs. New Japan - 53,900 sellout  
 Takayuki (Takashi) Iizuka b Osamu Matsuda  
 Naoki Sano & Pegasus Kid (Chris Benoit) b Jushin Liger & Akira Nogami  
 Tatsutoshi Goto & Hiro Saito & Norio Honaga b Kuniaki Kobayashi & Hiroshi Hase & Kantaro Hoshino  
 US vs. USSR strongest wrestler battle: Brad Rheingans b Victor Zangiev  
 US vs. USSR strongest wrestler battle: Steve Williams b Salman Hashimikov  
 AWA world heavyweight title: Masa Saito b Larry Zbyszko to win title  
 New Japan vs. All Japan: Jumbo Tsuruta & Yoshiaki Yatsu b Kengo Kimura & Osamu Kido  
 New Japan vs. All Japan: Genichiro Tenryu & Tiger Mask (Mitsuharu Misawa) b Riki Choshu & George Takano via count out  
 New Japan vs. All Japan for IWGP title: Big Van Vader DDQ Stan Hansen  
 Koji Kitao pro wrestling debut: Koji Kitao b Bam Bam Bigelow  
 Antonio Inoki & Seiji Sakaguchi b Shinya Hashimoto & Masahiro Chono with Lou Thesz as referee

The success of the two prior shows at the Dome led to something nearly unheard of—the three most powerful pro wrestling companies in the world at the time, WWF, New Japan, and All Japan, combined for a show on April 13, 1990. As one could imagine, when you had Giant Baba and Vince McMahon working together, there were all kinds of problems from people seeing things in different ways. The sides had all kinds of minor problems and cultural differences. When McMahon and Hulk Hogan showed up fashionably late for the press conference, Baba felt it was an insult.

WWF only had two demands when it came to finishes, that their two big stars, Hulk Hogan and Ultimate Warrior, be protected. Baba built the show around Hogan defending the WWF title against Terry Gordy. McMahon had Warrior beat Hogan at WrestleMania just 12 days before the event, and Baba was insulted that he wasn't informed ahead of time. New Japan after a while, decided it didn't even want to be involved, and eventually only stayed with the provision its wrestlers would only work with each other. Then, just before match-time, Gordy decided it wasn't in his best interest to do a job for Hogan. Gordy noted that his business was based in Japan, where he was a rising star. He was treated as a serious wrestler. Hogan's business wasn't based in Japan, and while popular in Japan where he was a national star before the U.S., Hogan was not considered a serious wrestler at the level of Gordy. WWF felt insulted that Baba couldn't get one of his top stars to do business as agreed upon. Stan Hansen, at the time a bigger star than Gordy, volunteered to put Hogan over. As it turned out, when the story of how things happened got out, Hansen ended up more popular for losing. The idea is he did the right thing for business even though he was considered a bigger star in Japan than Hogan, for the good of saving the show.

Still, it was notable that WWF coming to Japan for the first time, and the three big groups on the same show wasn't nearly as strong as New Japan's show a few months earlier, as this event did 43,700 fans and a 14.1 rating when aired on television a few days later.

One of the things notable about the show is two of the key wrestlers

of the 90s, Bret Hart and Mitsuharu Misawa, wrestled for the first and only time in a 20:00 draw in a prelim match. Misawa was just two months away from getting his big break with his win over Tsuruta at Budokan Hall. Hart was more than a year from his singles break when he beat Mr. Perfect for the IC title at Madison Square Garden. Other dominant stars like Toshiaki Kawada, Kenta Kobashi and Liger all appeared in prelims.

#### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - April 13, 1990**

U.S. and Japan Wrestling Summit - All Japan, New Japan and WWF - 43,700 fans

Dan Kroffat & Doug Furnas & Joe Malenko b Toshiaki Kawada &

Samson Fuyuki & Tatsumi Kitahara

Jushin Liger b Akira Nogami

Tito Santana & Jimmy Snuka b Kenta Kobashi & Masa Fuchi

Tiger Mask (Mitsuharu Misawa) d Bret Hart 20:00

Great Kabuki b Greg Valentine

Jake Roberts b Big Bossman

IWGP tag titles: Masa Saito & Shinya Hashimoto b Riki Choshu & Masahiro Chono

Jumbo Tsuruta & Haku b Curt Hennig & Rick Martel

Genichiro Tenryu b Randy Savage

WWF title: Ultimate Warrior b Ted DiBiase

Non-title: Giant Baba & Andre the Giant b Demolition

Hulk Hogan b Stan Hansen

In 1991, the American wrestling war spread to Japan, as New Japan and WCW booked a Dome show, "Starrcade in Tokyo Dome," headlined by Flair vs. Fujinami in a controversial battle of world champions, while new promotion Super World Sports teamed with WWF for a show nine days later with Hogan & Tenryu vs. The Road Warriors. New Japan announced a sellout, claiming to have 64,500 fans, the largest indoor sports crowd ever in Japan. The gate was 430 million yen (\$3.16 million based on the dollar value at the time). While that record was legit, the real attendance was probably 10,000 less, but it was sold out. WWF and SWS came back and announced 64,618 fans for their show, even though the real number was about 35,000 for a two-thirds full arena. The Flair vs. Fujinami show was notable because it aired in the U.S. on a several week tape delay as a PPV. The show also featured the 1991 match of the year, where The Steiner Brothers, who held both the WCW world and U.S. tag team titles, beat Hase & Kensuke Sasaki, the IWGP tag team champions, in a match where all three titles were at stake.

Fujinami, the IWGP champion, pinned Flair, the NWA and WCW champion. Somehow the end result was that there was a Dusty finish and the first ref called a DQ, even though fans left the Tokyo Dome celebrating that Fujinami had become the first New Japan wrestler to win the NWA title. The show was on a Thursday, and it wasn't until Saturday's afternoon newspapers in Japan where any hint of controversy was revealed. The story was that Dusty Rhodes and Barry Windham, the WCW reps at the show, went to New Japan President Seiji Sakaguchi and said they considered the match a no contest and that Flair was still champion, because Fujinami threw Flair over the top ropes, illegal under WCW rules, before the pinfall, and referee Bill Alfonso (long before he became a character in ECW), the original ref, saw it. Sakaguchi claimed that the over-the-top-rope rule isn't a DQ in Japan, so shouldn't have been a factor, plus that under New Japan rules, if something happens to the first referee, the second ref becomes the man in charge, and Masao Hattori's three count should have counted. What made it funnier is that Tokyo Sports interviewed Alfonso after the show (the idea was to keep the fact they were giving the belt back to Flair a secret for a few days), and stuck under the circumstances when asked directly who had won in his mind, he said Fujinami. The story that was supposed to come out was Alfonso claimed Flair won via DQ and Hattori would say Fujinami won. In Japan, the story was that Fujinami was NWA champion (in Japan the more prestigious of the titles), Flair was WCW champion,

and a rematch would be May 19 in St. Petersburg (which Flair won). In the U.S. they never acknowledged Fujinami having won the NWA title, or that the NWA and WCW title were different. The match aired on PPV, showing Fujinami pinning Flair and the celebration of the title win, but airing later backstage footage of Flair getting the belt back due to the over the top rope move before the pinfall that Alfonso saw.

#### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - March 21, 1991**

Starrcade in Tokyo Dome - New Japan & WCW - 54,500 sellout

Kengo Kimura & Animal Hamaguchi & Osamu Kido & Kantaro Hoshino

b Super Strong Machine & Hiro Saito & Tatsutoshi Goto & Norio

Honaga (\*\*3/4)

Shiro Koshinaka & Kuniaki Kobayashi & Takayuki Iizuka b Brian

Pillman & Tom Zenk & Tim Horner (\*\*\*3/4)

Scott Norton b The Equalizer (-\*1/2)

IWGP Jr. heavyweight title: Jushin Liger b Akira Nogami (\*\*\*1/2)

Barry Windham & Arn Anderson b Masahiro Chono & Masa Saito (\*\*)

WCW world, WCW U.S. and IWGP tag titles: Rick & Scott Steiner b

Hiroshi Hase & Kensuke Sasaki to win IWGP belts (\*\*\*\*1/2)

El Gigante b Big Cat Hughes (\*)

Big Van Vader & Bam Bam Bigelow b Ron Simmons & Butch Reed

(\*\*\*1/4)

Great Muta b Sting (\*\*\*1/2)

Greatest 18 Club World Martial arts championship: Riki Choshu b

Tiger Jeet Singh (\*1/2)

NWA & WCW vs. IWGP champion: Tatsumi Fujinami b Ric Flair (WCW reversed title loss due to a foul called by the original ref prior to a pin counted by the second ref (\*\*\*1/2))

The January 4th tradition began in 1992, for another joint show between New Japan and WCW, which sold the Dome out. The main event saw Choshu pin Fujinami to win the IWGP title in the latest chapter of their decade-long rivalry. Other big matches included Lex Luger keeping the WCW title over Chono, Sting & Muta beating the Steiner Brothers and Inoki beating Hase. In the opening match on the show, rookie Hiroyoshi Yamamoto lost to Black Cat.

Yamamoto, as Hiroyoshi Tenzan, will be appearing on Saturday's Dome show.

The next show at the Tokyo Dome was produced by Pro Wrestling Fujiwara Gumi on October 4, 1992. PWFG was a pro wrestling group that pushed itself as legitimate, built around veteran shooter Yoshiaki Fujiwara, but the two big stars were the cocky Suzuki and Masakatsu Funaki. Suzuki outraged the traditional pro wrestling community when he beat Joe Malenko, Karl Gotch's best ever student, who had been a name wrestler with All Japan, and said he was able to do so because Malenko had gotten rusty because he hadn't had a real match in so many years.

The show, called "Stack of Arms," drew 25,000 fans and \$1.5 million, not a blow away figure in the least, but impressive for a secondary promotion. The show was built around the house shooters facing a new group of Russians. Among them were 19-year-old giant Aleksei Medvedev, a 6-foot-8, 265-pounder from Belarus who did some matches for the group, and would be notable for being a guy who was a pro wrestler, who left pro wrestling and then won a silver medal in freestyle wrestling at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, who lost to Bart Vale. Vale marketed himself all the way into a Sports Illustrated story about being the world's toughest man, using credentials from winning worked matches in pro wrestling, most notably a win over Ken Shamrock. While not listed in his record, Shamrock had his first actual shoot, when he took down and submitted WKA world cruiserweight kickboxing champion Don Nakaya Neilsen in just 45 seconds. David Gobejshvili, the Russian who, along with Bruce Baumgartner, had dominated international wrestling for a number of years, winning gold in 1988 and bronze in 1992, made his pro wrestling debut, losing via submission to Suzuki. The main event saw Funaki go to a draw with Maurice Smith.

New Japan continued the annual January 4 tradition with loaded

shows. In 1993, a sellout of 53,500 came for a show headlined by Tenryu pinning Choshu, The Hell Raisers (Road Warrior Hawk & Sasaki) going to a double count out with the Steiners in the show stealing match, an IWGP champion vs. NWA champion dual title match were IWGP champ Muto became a double champion pinning Chono, and, at the time, the jr heavyweight dream match where Liger beat Ultimo Dragon to win the IWGP jr. title.

The 1994 version saw Tenryu beat Inoki in the main event, IWGP champion Hashimoto beat Chono, Hulk Hogan pinned Fujinami, the Steiners beat Muto & Hase, Hell Raisers beat Scott Norton & Hercules Hernandez to win the IWGP tag titles and Liger beat the latest version of Tiger Mask, this time being Koji Kanemoto.

Even though it didn't draw the biggest crowd, the most noteworthy Tokyo Dome show of that period, and by far the high point of women's pro wrestling, was on November 20, 1994. The 23-match marathon show started at 2 p.m. and ended at 12:30 a.m., and featured everything under the sun. The crowd of 32,500 fans saw an eight-woman tournament featuring the stars of every woman's promotion, the "Five Star tournament," which actually produced one five-star match in the first round with Aja Kong beating Manami Toyota. Akira Hokuto, now the wife of Sasaki, beat Kong in the finals of the most notable woman's pro wrestling tournament in history.

The show had interpromotional matches, legends matches (including bringing back Chigusa Nagayo, Lioness Asuka, Jaguar Yokota and Bison Kimura), a kick boxing match, a shoot boxing (takedowns and boxing, but no submissions) match and two amateur wrestling matches, and even two men's matches, a Lucha Libre style match from Michinoku Pro Wrestling, and a midgets handicap match.

Kyoko Hamaguchi, age 16, did her first and only pro wrestling match on the show. The daughter of Animal Hamaguchi, she was groomed from a young age to do bodybuilding and amateur wrestling. The idea was to win a world championship as an amateur, and then, with her family name and credentials, become the star of pro wrestling. The latter never happened due to women's pro wrestling in Japan collapsing on a big-time a few years later, and the introduction of women's wrestling to the Olympics, keeping her going in a quest to win a gold medal. Hamaguchi peaked before women's wrestling was an Olympic sport, capturing the world championship at 158 pounds in 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2003. She competed in three Olympics, 2004, 2008 and 2012, capturing bronze in the first two and not placing in the third. Hamaguchi lost to Doris Blind, a world class wrestler from France, in the four-match shoot portion of the show.

Winning in the shoot portion was, also in her only pro wrestling appearance, Miyu Yamamoto, beating Ana Gomes. Yamamoto was part of Japan's royal wrestling family as well as a model. At the show, even though she was an amateur wrestler on a pro show, the crowd took to both her and Hamaguchi as stars, more her because she was a world champion and Hamaguchi, who became far more famous in Japan from TV commercials and was a genuine celebrity, at that point was just a teenage daughter of a pro wrestler. Yamamoto's father wrestled in the 1972 Olympics and was later the Olympic team coach. Her sister was a world champion. Her brother is the famous Japanese MMA star Kid Yamamoto and she was at one time married to MMA star Enson Inoue. By the time of the show, she had already won two of her eventual three world championships.

The most unique of all the Tokyo Dome pro wrestling events took place on April 2, 1995. It was the same day as WrestleMania was taking place in Hartford, but there was no question what the big show that day was.

At the time, Weekly Pro Wrestling was the most powerful pro wrestling magazine in the world, selling 300,000 copies on an average week. They came up with an idea to get every promotion in Japan to send in one match and do a super show, with the idea that nobody would want to be outshone and the matches would be outstanding. With the exception of WAR, which was at war with the magazine over coverage, everyone participated. As you can imagine, match order became an issue. It took a huge guarantee to get All Japan to participate, but the decision was made to put New Japan, the

biggest promotion, on last. The All Japan main event, Misawa & Kobashi & Hansen going to a 30:00 draw with Kawada & Akira Taue & Johnny Ace, stole the show. The crowd was electric for the match all night, with loud chants of "Misawa" before the match even started. New Japan's IWGP champion Hashimoto beat Chono in the main event, but there was nothing the company's two aces could do to get the crowd up after what they had seen.

In all, 14 Hall of Famers wrestled on this show, which may be an all-time record. I can recall going to the building that day and thinking that there would never be a day in my life that I would see so much elite talent on one stage. It was a great show, a great spectacle, with several incredible matches. But I would still not call it the best pro wrestling show I ever saw, even though it was among the most memorable. But if it wasn't for the All Japan match, everyone would have left the arena talking about how the women stole the show.

### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - April 2, 1995**

Weekly Pro at Tokyo Dome - 13 promotion show - 50,000 sellout  
JWP: Dynamite Kansai & Hikari Fukuoka & Candy Okutsu & Fusayo Nouchi b Devil Masami & Mayumi Ozaki & Cutie Suzuki & Hiroumi Yagi (\*\*\*\*3/4)

LLPW/Ultimate Fight rules: Shinobu Kandori b Harley Saito (this match may have been a shoot—it certainly looked like it)

AJW: Aja Kong & Kyoko Inoue b Manami Toyota & Blizzard Yuki (Sakie Hasegawa) (\*\*\*\*½)

Go Gundan Interplanetary championship: Ryuma Go b Uchu Majin Silver X (\*)

IWA/barbed wire barricade barbed wire baseball bat tornado death match: Terry Funk & Shoji Nakamaki & Leatherface (Rick Patterson) b Cactus Jack & The Head Hunters (\*\*\*\*)

Pancrase: Minoru Suzuki b Christopher DeWeaver (this was a shoot)  
PWFG: Yoshiaki Fujiwara & Yuki Ishikawa b Don Arakawa & Carl Greco (½\*)

Michinoku Pro: Super Delfin & Taka Michinoku & Gran Naniwa b Great Sasuke & Sato (Dick Togo) & Shiryu (Kaz Hayashi) (\*\*\*\*1/4)

RINGS: Akira Maeda b Chris Dolman (DUD)

UWFI: Nobuhiko Takada & Billy Scott & Masahito Kakihara b Gary Albright & Jean Lydick & Kazuo Yamazaki (\*\*\*3/4)

FMW/Explosive barbed wire match: Great Nita (Atsushi Onita) b King Pogo (Mr. Pogo) (\*\*)

AJPW: Mitsuharu Misawa & Kenta Kobashi & Stan Hansen d Toshiaki Kawada & Akira Taue & Johnny Ace 30:00 (\*\*\*\*3/4)

NJPW: IWGP champion Shinya Hashimoto b Masahiro Chono (\*1/4)

Ironically, that show was not even remembered as the biggest show of 1995 in Japan. To this day, the October 9, 1995, match with Keiji Muto vs. Nobuhiko Takada is considered one of the biggest matches in Japanese wrestling history.

It started years earlier, when Lou Thesz, who was with the UWFI, would go back to his youth as a shooter and challenge all the other world champions. UWFI even paid WCW champion Big Van Vader what at the time was an enormous contract, \$35,000 per match, to come in and as champion, put Takada over clean in the middle with an armbar on a show that sold out the 46,000 seat Jingu Stadium in Tokyo. They were forever challenging the big world champions to face Takada. There were negotiations with New Japan about putting Takada vs. the IWGP champion, with both sides trying to spin the fact that matches never happened their own way.

However, UWFI fell into financial problems, and were headed for the iceberg. With nowhere else to turn, they went to New Japan, this time dealing from weakness. What took place, from a live event standpoint, was the biggest event up to that time in Japanese history. Not only was the Tokyo Dome sold out, but there was standing room everywhere. They announced 67,000 people, which was the usual exaggerated figure, but there was no papering at all and with jacked up ticket prices, they did \$6.1 million, a figure far beyond what any pro

wrestling show in history had ever done. It was a different vibe for the show of interpromotional matches.

Dealing from strength, Muto beat Takada via submission with the figure four leglock in the battle of each group's world champions. Make no mistake about it, this was revenge and not business. Takada was hugely over at the time and a run of him against New Japan's big stars would do record business, but he should have won the first one. Years later, New Japan pretty much acknowledged that when a similar situation took place with All Japan and Toshiaki Kawada, as Kawada won the first big match over New Japan's champion.

Still, many point to this as the high point of New Japan Pro Wrestling. Takada headlined the next three Tokyo Domes, drawing a sellout again on January 4, 1996, where he gained revenge and beat Muto to win the IWGP title. Takada sold out every arena title defense, until losing on April 29, 1996, before another overflow sellout crowd of 55,000, to Hashimoto. While Hashimoto had already been a Tokyo Dome headliner, it was this win that really cemented him as the tough guy of the promotion because Takada had that real aura to him.

The main event was not a great match, although it was good. But in hindsight, the match that today many talk about as the most interesting was the opener. Four prelim guys battled, as New Japan sent two of its national champion amateurs, Yuji Nagata & Tokimitsu Ishizawa (who later became Kendo Ka Shin) against UWFI's tough prelim guys, Kazushi Sakuraba & Hiromitsu Kanehara. The most heated action was Nagata vs. Sakuraba, and tapes of that were shown extensively this year. Nagata of course became New Japan's biggest star during a down period, and Sakuraba became a national hero in MMA.

An interesting note is that 13 of the 18 pro wrestlers on this show ended up fighting in MMA over the next several years, with various degrees of success.

#### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - October 9, 1995**

New Japan vs. UWFI - 57,000 sellout \$6.1 million

Tokimitsu Ishizawa & Yuji Nagata (NJ) b Kazushi Sakuraba & Hiromitsu Kanehara

Shinjiro Otani (NJ) b Kennichi Yamamoto

Yoshihiro Takayama (UWFI) b Takashi Iizuka

Naoki Sano (UWFI) b Jushin Liger

Riki Choshu (NJ) b Yoji Anjo

Masahito Kakihara (UWFI) b Kensuke Sasaki

Shinya Hashimoto (NJ) b Tatsuo Nakano

IWGP championship: Keiji Muto (NJ) b Nobuhiko Takada

Three months later, when the traditional Jan. 4 show came along, the company was blazing hot. Historically, "Wrestle War in Tokyo Dome" on January 4, 1996 not only continued New Japan vs. UWFI, but this show was historically significant because Eric Bischoff attended the show, and that's where the entire WCW vs. NWO feud idea came from, when he saw the incredible heat.

The show also featured a portend of things to come. Hiroyoshi Tenzan vs. Satoshi Kojima, who would later headline the Dome against each other in the IWGP champion vs. Triple Crown champion feud, were on second. Nagata and Sakuraba continued their prelim feud in the opener. The singles battle of the long-time top tag team, Hase vs. Sasaki took place. But perhaps the show stealer of all was Inoki's last sensational match, as just before his 53rd birthday he had a classic with Vader.

#### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - January 4, 1996**

Wrestle War in Tokyo Dome - New Japan vs. UWFI, 54,000 sellout

New Japan vs. UWFI: Yuji Nagata & Shinjiro Otani & Tokimitsu Ishizawa b Kennichi Yamamoto & Kazushi Sakuraba & Hiromitsu Kanehara

Hiroyoshi Tenzan b Satoshi Kojima

IWGP jr. title: Jushin Liger b Koji Kanemoto to win title

Shiro Koshinaka b Masahiro Chono

Hiromichi Fuyuki b Yoji Anjo

Kensuke Sasaki b Hiroshi Hase

Antonio Inoki b Big Van Vader

New Japan vs. UWFI: Riki Choshu b Masahito Kakihara

New Japan vs. UWFI: Shinya Hashimoto b Kazuo Yamazaki

New Japan vs. UWFI/IWGP heavyweight title: Nobuhiko Takada b Keiji Muto to win title

Business was so hot they were back to the Tokyo Dome on April 29, 1996, as Hashimoto pinned Takada to win the IWGP title before 55,000. It was a loaded show that included a legends dream match where Tenryu pinned Fujinami, an interpromotional match where Muta beat Michinoku Pro's Jinsei Shinzaki, a dream match with the Road Warriors & Power Warrior (Sasaki) teaming together for the first time beating The Steiners & Norton, Chono over Lex Luger, Savage over Tenzan and Great Sasuke beating Liger for the IWGP jr. title. The lineup was so loaded that Choshu was in the second match of the show.

Choshu would come back to headline the January 4, 1997, show, having just won the G-1 tournament. At the age of 45, he had announced in August he would enter his last G-1, a tournament he had never won. His quest became a huge story, particularly when he beat Hashimoto in an incredible match early in the tournament. He won the tournament and was able to draw a sellout.

Some notable undercard matches were a battle of generations, as the mid-80s New Japan best babyface tag team of Fujinami & Kengo Kimura were put together for a nostalgia run, and they beat Chono & Tenzan to win the IWGP tag titles. Liger beat Ultimo Dragon to win eight different junior heavyweight titles from around the world. And Inoki returned, beating Willie Williams. On February 27, 1980, Inoki went to a 15 round draw in a legendary match against Williams, a world champion in Kyokushin karate. But by this point, Williams was long past his prime and the match was terrible, unlike the first match, which was considered a legendary match. The second match on the show saw the debut of Super Liger, a wrestler in a Liger costume that was going to be his big rival. Chris Jericho was given his career break, and flopped so bad in it that the match, where he beat Kanemoto, never saw the light of day, and Super Liger was done after one match. Jericho has joked about choking on what was the biggest stage up to that point of his career.

The April 12, 1997, show, which drew 50,500, was originally supposed to have Hashimoto beat UFC star Ken Shamrock, as part of a deal where Shamrock would then win the second meeting and become IWGP champion. However, Shamrock signed instead with WWF. Instead, Naoya Ogawa, the 1992 silver medalist in judo and a three-time world heavyweight champion in the sport, who was to make his debut on the card, was moved to the main event spot, and started one of Japan's most noteworthy feuds ever, with Hashimoto, beating him in a non-title match. While a nothing match, the show also brought back Satoru Sayama, the original Tiger Mask, who had left New Japan in 1983, to lose to Inoki. It was Sayama's public announcements in 1983 regarding Inoki's business dealings that led to New Japan nearly collapsing and Inoki being forced out of power.

The next Tokyo Dome event was October 11, 1997, which is now noteworthy because a new promotion was formed and the main event was Rickson Gracie vs. Takada. Fans had clamored for that match for years, ever since Gracie had beaten up Yoji Anjo in his dojo in a real street fight (Anjo started it and was dealt with harshly). In fact, the fall of UWFI was traced to this, because Takada was expected to avenge Anjo's defeat. But the match never happened, because they couldn't convince Gracie to work with Takada no matter how much money was offered. By this point, Takada had gone through dream matches. His deal with New Japan was over, and a deal with All Japan, which would have been huge, fell through. With no big money matches left, he was a lamb being led to slaughter for a big payoff.

Pride One paled in comparison to what Pride would turn out to be. Several undercard matches were worked, including a battle of giants where Kitao beat Nathan Jones, who years later would have a brief stint in WWF. The semifinal, a boring 30:00 draw with Dan

Severn vs. Kimo, left Severn with a bad leg injury. Severn had actually booked a fight six days before he was scheduled to face Maurice Smith for the UFC heavyweight title, but due to the injury, had to pull out. UFC was furious, and Severn was never used again, except brought back as an emergency replacement years later under new ownership, to face Pedro Rizzo, where he got waxed. Gracie armbarred Takada in 4:47 before 37,000 fans. But what was most notable is that eight percent of the Japanese homes that had PPV, which were probably less than 1.5 million in the entire country, ordered the show. A rematch a year later to the day saw Takada last 9:30 before submitting again to Gracie.

The January 4, 1998, Dome show, "Power Hall in Tokyo Dome," drew a sellout of 55,000 fans, billed as Choshu's retirement show. It's notable that 16 years later, Choshu is still wrestling. But he was serious at the time. Choshu's theme song, "Power Hall," was among the most famous entrance music ever in Japan (it was even used by Japanese fighters a generation later on UFC shows). He was going to retire with five singles matches as the big draw on a show headlined by IWGP champion Sasaki beating Muto, and the Don Frye vs. Ogawa feud continuing with Frye winning via submission. Choshu scored wins over Kazuyuki Fujita, Yutaka Yoshie and Tatsuhiro Takaiwa. Then he lost via submission to Iizuka with the idea this would make Iizuka a big star. But in his final career match, he pinned Liger.

But that paled in comparison to what was next. Inoki, one of the big three pro wrestling stars and ten biggest name sports stars of the century in Japan, had his retirement show on April 4, 1998. While Inoki has done a few exhibition matches with Fujinami and Renzo Gracie, he never did have an official coming out of retirement match. The show drew an overflow crowd of 57,000 fans and a gate of \$7 million, a pro wrestling record that held up until the 2009 WrestleMania, and is still the fourth biggest ever.

The show, and the week, was all about Inoki. Those who attended as guests for "The Inoki Final," included Muhammad Ali (who faced Inoki in what was, on a worldwide basis, New Japan's biggest match in history), Bob Backlund (who Inoki faced several times for the WWF title), Bischoff, Jeff Blatnick (the UFC announcer who won a gold medal in wrestling at the 1984 Olympics after beating cancer), Choshu, Kokichi Endo (a sumo who was Rikidozan's tag team partner in the 50s), Animal Hamaguchi, Killer Khan, Maeda, Wilhelm Ruska (1972 gold medalist in judo who had Inoki's first famous mixed match in 1976), Sakaguchi, Tenryu and Michiaki Yoshimura (a major star from the 60s known at the time as Japan's best technical wrestler and an early tag team partner of Inoki when he got his first push).

Inoki had planned to put over Don Frye in the main event, feeling it was the right thing for business, to create a new superstar on what was clearly going to be among the biggest pro wrestling shows in history. But plans change and everyone convinced Inoki, of all things, that he needed to go out on top and end the show that way. Frye accidentally broke Inoki's ribs, and the planned 15:00 match ended at 4:09 with Inoki winning with the Octopus submission.

A tournament was held to determine who would face Inoki, where Ogawa beat Brian Johnston (a former UFC fighter) and Frye beat Igor Meindert (a 6-foot-8, 270-pound former Russian wrestling champion), and then Frye beat Ogawa with punches from the mount, when Satoru Sayama threw in the towel for Ogawa, to get the shot.

Other noteworthy matches included Fujinami setting a record with his fifth IWGP title win, pinning Sasaki in 21:18 with a German suplex; and Muto & Chono retaining the IWGP tag titles over Hashimoto & Osamu Nishimura in a match where, if they lost, Muto & Chono would have to leave the NWO.

#### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - April 4, 1998**

The Inoki Final, New Japan - 57,000 sellout \$7 million gate  
Semifinals of tournament to face Inoki: Naoya Ogawa b Brian Johnston  
Semifinals of tournament to face Inoki: Don Frye b Igor Meindert  
Manabu Nakanishi & Satoshi Kojima b Hiro Saito & Hiroyoshi Tenzan  
Shiro Koshinaka & Tatsutoshi Goto & Michiyoshi Ohara b Tadao

Yasuda & Kazuo Yamazaki & Junji Hirata (Super Strong Machine)  
Tatsuhito Takaiwa b Koji Kanemoto  
Shinjiro Otani b Yuji Yasuraoka  
Finals of right to face Inoki tournament: Don Frye b Naoya Ogawa  
IWGP Jr. title: Jushin Liger b Kendo Ka Shin  
IWGP tag titles: Keiji Muto & Masahiro Chono b Shinya Hashimoto & Osamu Nishimura  
IWGP title: Tatsumi Fujinami b Kensuke Sasaki to win title  
Inoki retirement match: Antonio Inoki b Don Frye

As successful as All Japan was during the 90s, Giant Baba cautiously avoided booking the Tokyo Dome. His thought was that doing super spectaculars would make the usual big shows less meaningful. It was similar to the reason Sam Muchnick never booked a stadium show, noting that while some people may do bigger business than us for one night, we don't hotshot and will always do steady business while others have huge up and down swings. However, the Dome business for New Japan had gotten so big, enough to carry almost an entire year, that Baba realized his thinking was outdated.

Baba booked a Tokyo Dome show on May 1, 1998, with a double main event of Kawada beating Misawa in 28:15 to win the Triple Crown, the first time Kawada had beaten Misawa in a title match, and Kobashi & Ace beating Hansen & Vader. The show drew 48,300 fans.

K-1 was starting to establish its own Tokyo Dome tradition every December starting in 1997, with sellouts for the annual heavyweight Grand Prix tournament. K-1 ran the end of the year at the Dome until 2006, selling out every year until 2003.

The January 4, 1999, New Japan show drew another sellout of 52,500. Muto beating Norton via submission to keep the IWGP title was the main event, while Tenzan & Kojima won the tag titles from Tenryu & Shiro Koshinaka. But the big draw was the Hashimoto vs. Ogawa feud, a match that was technically a no contest, but Ogawa pretty much shot on Hashimoto and exposed he was not a real fighter. This ended up being among the most controversial moves in modern Japanese wrestling. It did pay dividends, as Hashimoto vs. Ogawa is remembered as one of the biggest Japanese wrestling feuds ever. Nothing in pro wrestling reached the level of mainstream interest as their final match, even Muto vs. Takada. But it also started New Japan in a direction of which, a decade later, there seemed to be no return from.

They sold out again on April 10, 1999, when Muto beat Frye via submission to keep the IWGP title and Sasaki & Koshinaka kept the tag titles over Tenryu & Fujinami. Ogawa vs. Hashimoto was so hot they booked a third Dome, on October 11, 1999, with Ogawa beating Hashimoto with Fujinami as ref, Muto beating Nakanishi to keep the IWGP title, Tenryu over Sasaki and Frye & Chono over Norton & Kojima, drawing 48,000.

All Japan's second Tokyo Dome show, on May 2, 1999, was the Baba Memorial show. Baba had passed away from cancer three months earlier at the age of 61. He was still wrestling on every show until less than two months before his death. He was well aware he had cancer and didn't have much longer to live. Misawa and Kawada had a Triple Crown title match that was one of the best of their matches, where Kawada worked most of the match with a broken arm he suffered early on. Baba was hospitalized at this point and didn't have much longer to go, but watched the bout on TV, and made a statement that he had just witnessed the greatest match he had ever seen. He died a few days later.

They booked a ceremonial retirement show, since Baba had passed away without having one. Baba was, along with Inoki and Rikidozan, one of the three biggest wrestling stars in Japanese history, and it's actually inconceivable anyone will ever eclipse those three in the culture. What isn't known is that New Japan felt this show would be the perfect place for a dream match, with Kawada vs. Hashimoto, thinking it was time to pull the trigger on the All Japan vs. New Japan feud. Even though NTV, the network that aired All Japan was all for it, Motoko Baba, the widow of Giant Baba, who now owned the company,

turned it down, saying that the show was going to sellout without it.

Baba's boots were put in the ring in one corner. Referee Joe Higuchi, who many believe was the greatest pro wrestling referee ever, came to the ring. The Destroyer came out, and stood in the corner next to Baba's boots. Gene Kiniski and Bruno Sammartino came out in the other corner. Lord James Blears, the figurehead president of the Pacific Wrestling Federation, came out to read a proclamation, all treating it like a tag team match of legends was about to take place. The bell rang, and on the screen, they showed clips of Baba's matches with Sammartino, Kiniski, Destroyer, Hansen, Bobo Brazil, Jack Brisco and Abdullah the Butcher. It was Baba who sold out the Dome with more than 50,000 fans, and his main protegee, Misawa, who regained the Triple Crown from Vader in the main event.

New Japan sold out again on January 4, 2000. Sasaki beating Tenryu to win the IWGP title was the main event, but the big heat was for a tag team match where Hashimoto & Iizuka beat Ogawa & Kazunari Murakami.

This set up yet another Ogawa vs. Hashimoto match on April 7, 2000, at the Dome. What was notable is the show drew about 40,000 fans (announced as 60,000), the smallest for a New Japan Dome show, for their fifth Tokyo Dome main event, a record. But general public interest was through the roof for the Hashimoto vs. Ogawa feud, as Hashimoto vowed to retire if Ogawa beat him one more time. They also pushed it as Inoki's protegee, Ogawa, against Sakaguchi's protegee, Hashimoto. The thought was each would second their guy, but instead both were at ringside just rooting them on.

This was the second double-cross on Hashimoto, as the first was the original angle, which saw Ogawa shoot on Hashimoto and elbow his spine and attempt to injure him. During the 90s, Hashimoto, even though fat, because of his hard kicks and fiery comebacks with chops, was, to the public, the toughest guy on the New Japan roster. While he had a submission background, he was not that in real life. Ogawa somewhat exposed that myth with a shoot situation where Hashimoto could do nothing with him, and blew up fast. But the dynamic of the shoot being the start of the worked angle made this one of the biggest mainstream feuds Japan has had in the past 25 years. There were 34 million viewers on TV-Asahi watching the match, more than double what the network was expecting, and largest for a Japanese pro wrestling match in 14 years, since the Antonio Inoki vs. Leon Spinks wrestler vs. boxer confrontation.

When the stipulation was announced, Hashimoto was going to win. The idea Hashimoto would retire if he lost was the main reason it was so big to the public, as at that point, the feeling was to believe the stipulation. Immediately after the match, Fujinami said that Hashimoto was too young to retire. Ogawa suffered a dislocated shoulder, but won via knockout via judo foot sweep n 15:09.

What could be argued was the biggest MMA match historically in Japan took place on May 1, 2000, at the Dome. The show featured the final eight in a World Grand Prix tournament that opened on January 30.

Four years earlier, Sakuraba was opening the Dome. On this night he became a hero. Before 38,000 fans, Sakuraba beat Royce Gracie in a non-title match, when, after 90 minutes of a no time limit must be a winner match, Sakuraba's constant leg kicks injured Gracie so badly that his corner threw in the towel. At the 87 minute mark, Rorion Gracie was about to throw in the towel, when Helio Gracie refused to let him. Royce Gracie refused to quit until the 90 minute mark, and then Helio allowed Rorion to throw in the towel and shook hands with Sakuraba.

After fighting for 90 minutes, starting out at 174 pounds, Sakuraba then advanced to face Igor Vovchanchyn, the top Russian in the sport at the time, who was more than 50 pounds heavier. Sakuraba was winning the first ten minutes of the fight, when his system just shut down. He survived five more minutes where he had nothing left, before Takada threw in the towel for him. Vovchanchyn lost in the finals to former UFC champion Mark Coleman, who won what was, up to that point in history, the biggest MMA tournament of all-time.

### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - May 1, 2000**

Pride Open Weight Grand Prix tournament - 38,000

#### **QUARTERFINALS**

Igor Vovchanchyn b Gary Goodridge via TKO in 10:14

No time limit: Kazushi Sakuraba b Royce Gracie via corner throwing in towel 90:00

Mark Coleman b Akira Shoji via decision 15:00

Kazuyuki Fujita b Mark Kerr via decision 15:00

Non tournament reserve fight: Guy Mezger b Masaaaki Satake via decision 20:00

#### **SEMIFINALS**

Igor Vovchanchyn b Kazushi Sakuraba via corner throwing in towel 15:00

Mark Coleman b Kazuyuki Fujita via forfeit (Fujita injured his knee against Kerr)

Non tournament: Ken Shamrock b Alexander Otsuka 9:43

FINALS/No time limit: Mark Coleman b Igor Vovchanchyn 23:09 knees to the head on the ground

Only a few weeks later, on May 26, 2000, a crowd of 25,000 saw Rickson Gracie beat Masakatsu Funaki via choke in 12:49 at the Tokyo Dome.

For years promoters in Japan offered seven figures to Rickson Gracie to face Sakuraba. Gracie was 41 by this time, and the challenge was never accepted. Gracie never fought again. Funaki also retired to go into acting, but returned more than seven years later for a New Year's Eve fight at the Osaka Dome where he was submitted by Sakuraba.

The elusive All Japan vs. New Japan feud started as New Japan attempted to recreate the heat of the UWFI feud. A lot had happened over the past year in All Japan. Misawa and most of the talent, with the exception of Kawada, Taiyo Kea and Masa Fuchi, left to form Pro Wrestling NOAH. All Japan brought Tenryu back and for survival, did the one thing Giant Baba would never do, the full scale program.

Do Judge!!, drew a sellout of 54,000 fans as Kawada, the top star from All Japan, beat IWGP champion Sasaki in a fantastic match. It was really almost a one-match show, although they did try and recreate the Vader vs. Hansen era match by pitting Steve Williams of All Japan against Scott Norton. All Japan won both singles matches, a far cry from the UWFI feud which was more about revenge than business. The attempt to rebuild Hashimoto saw him beat Fujinami via submission. As good as Kawada was, he didn't have the drawing power or heat after the first match that Takada had.

Sasaki vacated the IWGP title with a loss to the All Japan top star, and vowed to win a tournament on January 4, 2001, to prove he was worthy to hold the belt. The one-night tournament was excellent. Sasaki first beat Kojima and Tenzan pinned Nagata. In the semifinals, Sasaki beat Chono via submission, and in probably the best match of the card, Kawada beat Tenzan. Sasaki pinned Kawada with a Northern Lights bomb in a super heated rematch. An example of going to the well too often was with Choshu coming out of retirement, he faced Hashimoto and they worked it stiff and the crowd went crazy, but it turned into something that looked like a street fight and wrestlers came in and broke it up for both men's safety. But fans were furious, having been taught that every big match has a clean finish. They were trying to do the angle as the exception, but the people didn't buy it, with loud "refund" chants.

All Japan had a Dome show on January 28, 2001, drawing 30,000 fans, built around the retirement of Hansen, 51, whose lower back was so bad by this point that he couldn't even do a retirement match. It was really a one-match show, with the idea of Kawada & Sasaki as a team after their two great battles, beating Tenryu & Hase when Kawada pinned Hase. With Sasaki as IWGP champion and Tenryu as Triple Crown champion, it was the first time the two world champions would be in the ring against each other in history.

New Japan returned on October 8, 2001, drawing 47,000 fans for a match where wrestlers from All Japan, New Japan and NOAH would be involved. Nagata (New Japan) & Jun Akiyama (NOAH) beat Hase

(All Japan) & Muto (New Japan but about to become All Japan). The other advertising was two "Vale Tudo" matches, which was the term used that year for worked shoots, with Nakanishi beating Tadao Yasuda and Fujita beating Sasaki. They also had a legends match with Backlund & Fujinami beating Dory Funk Jr. & Terry Funk.

But the big Tokyo Dome event was a month later. After Sakuraba had beaten Royler, Royce, Renzo, Ryan Gracie, he was destroyed in short order by the bigger Wanderlei Silva. Sakuraba was 174 against Royce without weight cutting although he was light because he needed stamina for a no time limit match. But in shape he was 180 pounds at best. Silva was 225, cutting to make 203.6lb. Sakuraba was so big that him going for revenge was going to be the biggest match in Pride's history. It had barely been a year since the Sakuraba vs. Royce match, but everything in Japan had changed. Sakuraba vs. Royce couldn't sell out the Tokyo Dome, nor could either Rickson vs. Takada match, both doing in the middle 30,000s with heavy papering.

But now, Pride was selling out everything with Sakuraba. Sakuraba was doing well in the match, even winning the first round until he was slammed on his shoulder and it dislocated, and the match ended up being stopped. One name on the show interesting was Matt Skelton, who former U.S. national team wrestler Tom Erikson beat in 1:11. Skelton, a mediocre kickboxer and even less than mediocre MMA fighter, at the age of 35, went into boxing, a sport he had never done. After going 21-1, at the age of 40, he was British and European heavyweight champion and got a shot at WBA champion Ruslan Chagaev in Germany, losing via 12 round decision.

At the time, in Japan, pro wrestling and MMA were covered as essentially the same thing, only one was a shoot and the other wasn't. When Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira beat Heath Herring to become Pride's first-ever world heavyweight champion, it was considered the first time in Japanese history that a shoot world heavyweight title existed.

#### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - November 3, 2001**

Pride 17 - 53,246 \$5.5 million

Renzo Gracie b Michiyoshi Ohara (New Japan)

Quinton Rampage Jackson b Yuki Ishikawa (Battlarts)

Dan Henderson b Murilo Ninja Rua

Semmy Schilt b Masaaki Satake

Mario Sperry b Igor Vovchanchyn

Tom Erikson b Matt Skelton

Nobuhiko Takada d Mirko Cro Cop 5 rounds

Tournament final to determine Pride heavyweight champion: Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira b Heath Herring

Pride middleweight (203.6 pound weight class) title: Wanderlei Silva b Kazushi Sakuraba to become first champion

New Japan sold out with 52,000 on January 4, 2002, a show built around GHC champion Akiyama coming to New Japan to face Nagata, and he retained his title. It was the last time New Japan sold out the Tokyo Dome.

On May 2, 2002, they ran their 30th anniversary show at the Tokyo Dome, and drew 47,000 fans. The 13-match show included the first woman's match on a New Japan Tokyo Dome show, as Momoe Nakanishi & Kaoru Ito beat Manami Toyota & Yumiko Hotta. Ogawa & Hashimoto were a tag team by this time beating Norton & Tenzan. Bas Rutten had been working New Japan big shows, and picked up pro wrestling quickly, beating Nakanishi. The Steiner Brothers beat Hiroshi Tanahashi & Sasaki in a match where Joanie Laurer (Chyna) was the special referee. IWGP champion Nagata beat Takayama in a title defense. But the real main event was the first and only singles match with Misawa vs. Chono, going to a 30:00 draw.

An October 14, 2002, show drew 38,000, with Nagata retaining the IWGP title beating Pride star Fujita, K-1 star Bob Sapp beat Nakanishi and in the first-ever man vs. woman match on a Tokyo Dome show, Chono beat Laurer. Among notable underneath matches, Nishimura and Rutten went to a 30:00 draw which got some votes by the Japanese press for match of the year, fighting under European rules

with Tony St. Clair as referee. Koji Kanemoto kept the IWGP jr. title beating Heat (Minoru Tanaka). Bryan Danielson worked a prelim match, teaming with Rocky Romero & Ricky Reyes to lose to Liger & Kahirara & Tiger Mask.

Pride booked the Tokyo Dome for November 24, 2002. It was billed as Takada's retirement match, and drew 52,228 fans, as Takada's protege, Kiyoshi Tamura, knocked him out in the second round. The show also featured the debut of 1992 judo gold medalist Hidehiko Yoshida, who beat Frye via armbar. The result stunned so many people, since it was Yoshida's debut, that for years people would claim it to be fixed even though X-rays showed Frye's elbow being destroyed and he ended up getting surgery because he was Don Frye and wouldn't tap to the "fake" armbar.

New Japan had been having problems for years, but they still could draw at the Tokyo Dome. The sign that things were really bad was that, even with papering, the January 4, 2003, show, where IWGP champion Nagata faced Josh Barnett, drew 30,000 fans, the lowest they had ever done. Barnett had beaten Randy Couture for the UFC heavyweight title on March 22, 2002, in Las Vegas, but tested positive for steroids and was stripped of the title. Barnett at times blamed the UFC and instead signed with New Japan.

Two weeks later was probably the worst Tokyo Dome show ever. A new promotion called Wrestle-1 debuted on January 19, 2003. Hogan had received a huge offer to do a dream match, Hogan & Takayama vs. Muto & Bill Goldberg. After meeting with company officials, he saw that they had no idea what they were doing, and felt it would hurt him to take the money because he would be part of a failure. He tried to explain that four babyfaces thrown together in a tag match with no build-up and no concept of where it was going to go made no sense. Hogan instead suggested doing a singles match against either Takayama or Ogawa, saying he would lose to either, figuring he knew how to lose, put on the right face, and get over more than the winner, as he'd proven in the past with Rock and Ultimate Warrior. However, he was turned down. When Takayama found out Hogan offered to lose to him and the promotion turned it down, he wanted no part of the show. The promotion at the last minute tried to make deals with Sting, Lex Luger and Goldberg, finally getting Goldberg for \$125,000 for one match. Sting and Luger both turned down \$25,000 for one match, so instead they got Brian Adams and Bryan Clarke.

Then it got better. They advertised Sapp vs. Ernesto Hoost, who had two legendary kickboxing matches with each other, as the main event. Then they said Hoost backed out at the last minute because his trainer didn't want him to do pro wrestling. When Hoost came to Japan, he said he was going to the show, but didn't want to do pro wrestling. Then, the day of the show, too late for most newspapers (still the main source of info at the time), Hoost shot an angle with Sapp. About 20,000 fans attended, but few of them were paid. Hoost, the non-pro wrestler, pinned Sapp after hitting him with a chair in 5:50 on a show with such weird matches as Goldberg & Muto over Adams & Clarke, Hashimoto over Joe Son (now serving a life term in prison for a rape and a murder), Mark Coleman & Kevin Randleman over the Giant Convicts (Jan "The Giant" Nortje & Dalip "Great Khali" Singh), Hase & Kojima over Terry Funk & Heath Herring and Ultimo Dragon & Kaz Hayashi over CMLL's best tag team, Ultimo Guerrero & Rey Bucanero.

New Japan still managed to draw 49,000 fans on May 2, 2003, for the dream match where Kobashi beat Chono to keep the GHC title while NWF champ Takayama beat IWGP champ Nagata in the title unification match. The 11-match show had five legitimate shoot matches on it, and six worked matches. The opening match saw Tenzan pin Hiroshi Tanahashi. Shoot matches included then-New Japan contracted wrestler Lyoto (now Lyoto Machida of UFC fame) beating Pancrase's Kengo Watanabe (a rugby superstar that they tried to turn into a fighter), Tsuyoshi Kosaka beat Dolgorsuren Sumiyabazar (an Olympic wrestler from Mongolia, the brother of Asashoryu, a huge Japanese sumo celebrity at the time and who later became Mongolia's national pro wrestling hero), Shinsuke Nakamura made Jan "The Giant" Nortje submit, Barnett knocked out powerlifter Jimmy Ambriz and Fujita knocked out Nakanishi.

They drew 37,000 on October 13, 2003, for what turned out to be Hogan's last match in Japan, beating Chono. The show featured three shoot matches, including a world title shoot as Barnett retained the Pancrase Open weight title beating Yoshiki Takahashi (who once fought in UFC) via submission. The actual draws on the show were Bob Sapp, the return of Hogan, and perhaps more than anything else, Seiji Sakaguchi coming out of retirement for one last match.

The main event was an elimination match with Sakaguchi captaining the New Japan team against the outsider shooters led by Sapp. Takayama & Fujita & Minoru Suzuki & Nakamura (who was in New Japan but was doing MMA at the time) & Sapp beat Tenzan & Nagata & Nakanishi & Tanahashi & Sakaguchi). It came down to Sapp & Suzuki vs. Tanahashi (in his first high profile Dome role) & Nagata, with Sapp pinning Tanahashi first, and ending with Suzuki knocking out Nagata in 39:54.

The biggest Dome show was on November 9, 2003, a hugely successful PPV show called Final Conflict 2003, with the final four of a middleweight tournament with Rampage Jackson vs. UFC star Chuck Liddell, and Wanderlei Silva vs. Yoshida, leading to the Silva vs. Jackson was in the finals. Of the 14 fighters on the show, eight either were or ended up as pro wrestlers.

#### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - November 9, 2003**

Final Conflict 2003 Pride 53,000 sellout/4.2 percent PPV buy rate

Gary Goodridge b Daniel Bobish

Middleweight Grand Prix semifinals: Quinton Jackson b Chuck Liddell via TKO

Middleweight Grand Prix semifinals: Wanderlei Silva b Hidehiko Yoshida via decision

Dan Henderson b Murilo Bustamante

Heath Herring b Norihisa Yamamoto

Kazushi Sakuraba b Kevin Randleman

Interim heavyweight title: Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira b Heath Herring to win vacant title (champion Fedor Emelianenko was injured with a broken finger)

Grand Prix finals: Wanderlei Silva b Quinton Jackson

New Japan opened 2004, with the traditional January 4th show, "Wrestling World 2004," drawing 40,000 fans, largely for the match where Sapp & Muto (who by this time was the top star of All Japan) formed a tag team to beat Chono & Tenzan. The 17-match show also had a champion vs. champion match where IWGP champion Nakamura beat NWF champion Takayama via submission. The show featured the retirement ceremony for Fujinami, who is still wrestling now, ten years later. Nagata beat Sasaki and Nakanishi beat Tenryu. Tanahashi beat Yutaka Yoshie to retain the new Under-30 championship (meaning you had to be under the age of 30 to fight for it) and Liger beat Takashi Sugiura to win NOAH's GHC jr. heavyweight title.

A May 3, 2004, show drew 35,000 fans headlined by Sapp retaining the IWGP title over Nakamura after two Beast Bombs. The show was built around four New Japan vs. K-1 matches. The other three were Yutaka Yoshie beating Jan Nortje in a terrible match, Tanahashi beat Sean O'Haire (who after being fired by WWF signed with K-1) via submission, and Musashi of K-1 beat Katsuyori Shibata with a super stiff high kick knockout.

By this point, Pro Wrestling NOAH, on the back of Kobashi, easily the biggest star in Japanese wrestling, had surpassed New Japan. After Kobashi's GHC title reign led to a series of Budokan Hall sellouts and was the best world title positioning and match quality run of the last 15 years, they booked a July 10, 2004, date at the Tokyo Dome for their biggest match possible, Kobashi vs. Akiyama for the title. Kobashi retained the title in 35:34 in that year's Match of the Year. The show drew a near sellout of 50,000 fans with the other big hook being a tag match where Misawa and Muto would face off against each other for the first and only time. Misawa & Yoshinari Ogawa beat Muto & Taiyo Kea. Liger came in from New Japan to defend the GHC jr. title against Yoshinobu Kanemaru, with Kanemaru taking the

title. Takayama & Minoru Suzuki coming from New Japan retained the IWGP tag titles against Takeshi Morishima & Takeshi Rikio.

On January 4, 2005, a crowd of 46,000 came for a weird show, overall terrible, but it was the first Tokyo Dome show headlined by Nakamura vs. Tanahashi, who will be headlining nine years later. Nakamura won this by submission to take the U-30 championship. The show featured what was billed as an Ultimate Royal tournament, essentially a series of worked shoot matches with guys who all had shoot backgrounds. Ron Waterman, who was getting a monster push as the new foreign star, beat Nagata in just 1:41 of the finals. Waterman beat Masayuki Naruse, Nakanishi and Nagata in a combined 5:18. The show also had Nagata beating his brother, Katsuhiko Nagata via points in what was billed as an amateur rules match. Katsuhiko Nagata, much smaller than Yuji, won a silver medal in Greco-roman wrestling in the 2000 Olympics. Yuji followed beating Blue Wolf and Dolgorsuren Sumiyabazar, both brothers of Asashoryu.

The bad show, and the worked shoot style more than running its course left things in a bad way. On May 14, 2005, when Kojima had become the first man to hold both the IWGP title and Triple Crown title at the same time, Kojima coming back to New Japan to put their belt on the line against long-time partner Tenzan, drew only 21,000 fans, even with Misawa on the show. Tenzan won the match and took the IWGP title, while Kojima remained Triple Crown champion. Misawa & Fujinami beat Chono & Liger in a legends match. Nakanishi & Tanahashi were IWGP tag champions at this tie and beat Nakanishi & Ka Shin.

NOAH's biggest show ever was on July 18, 2005, with a double main event of the last Misawa vs. Kawada match and the first and only Kobashi vs. Sasaki bout. While Misawa vs. Kawada was the legendary rivalry from the 90s, the Kobashi and Sasaki match stole the show with the endless chop sequence. Notable on that show is that the challenger to new GHC champion Takeshi Rikio (who had ended Kobashi's two year reign in a failed attempt to create a new star), was Hiroshi Tanahashi.

#### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - July 18, 2005**

Destiny 2005 Pro Wrestling NOAH 52,000 sellout

Takashi Sugiura & Suwa & Masashi Aoyagi b Tsuyoshi Kikuchi & Mitsuo Momota & Katsuhiko Nakajima

Takeshi Morishima & Mohammed Yone b Tamon Honda & Go Shiozaki

Akitoshi Saito & Shiro Koshinaka & Masao Inoue & Kishin Kawabata b Akira Taue & Takuma Sano & Jun Izumida & Haruka Eigen

Mushiking Terry (Kotaro Suzuki) b Black Mask (Ricky Marvin)

GHC jr. title: KENTA b Yoshinobu Kanemaru to win title

GHC tag titles: Minoru Suzuki & Naomichi Marufuji b Jun Akiyama & Makoto Hashi

GHC heavyweight title: Takeshi Rikio b Hiroshi Tanahashi

Genichiro Tenryu b Yoshinari Ogawa

Kenta Kobashi b Kensuke Sasaki

Mitsuharu Misawa b Toshiaki Kawada

The arrival of Brock Lesnar on October 8, 2005, only drew 16,000 for a three-way match for the IWGP title. Fujita, the champion, defended against Lesnar and Chono, with Lesnar beating Chono to take the title. Tanahashi & Nakamura beat Kawada & Anjo in the semi.

Lesnar beating Nakamura to keep the IWGP title headlined the January 4, 2006, show drawing 31,000, with little underneath.

January 4, 2007 drew 18,000, and heavily papered, a disaster for the biggest show of the year, with a New Japan vs. All Japan theme. It was the first year the show was billed as Wrestle Kingdom at the Tokyo Dome, which is now the show's annual name. The show drew poorly even with four top matches, Kawada beat Nakamura, Suzuki retained the Triple Crown beating Nagata, Tanahashi retained the IWGP title beating All Japan's Taiyo Kea and Muto & Chono beat Tenzan & Kojima.

On January 4, 2008, they drew 20,000, with Nakamura over Tanahashi to win the IWGP title, while Kurt Angle, who held the IGF's

version of the IWGP title (Lesnar never lost the title as the promotion cut his money while he was champion so he quit the promotion instead of coming back to lose to Tanahashi), beat Nagata. New Japan was working with TNA at this point and Angle vs. Nagata, Giant Bernard (Tensai) & Travis Tomko keeping the IWGP tag titles over the Steiner Brothers, Team 3-D over Togi Makabe & Toru Yano, Jr. champ Wataru Inoue over Christopher Daniels and Christian Cage & A.J. Styles & Petey Williams over Milano Collection A.T. & Prince Devitt & Minoru were part of that deal. Several of the matches aired later on Spike TV.

The January 4, 2009 show, drawing 27,500 saw Tanahashi win the IWGP title from Muto in 30:22, while Nakanishi & Hirooki Goto beat Misawa & Sugiura of NOAH. There were several matches again with TNA talent, and the matches aired months later on Spike TV. Alex Shelley & Chris Sabin won the IWGP jr. tag titles from Yujiro (Takahashi) & Tetsuya Naito. Tiger Mask beat Low Ki to keep the IWGP jr. title. Choshu & Chono & Angle & Kevin Nash as the legends team beat Bernard & Iizuka & Tomohiro Ishii & Karl Anderson.

On January 4, 2010, before 20,000 fans, Nakamura beat Takayama to retain the IWGP title, Sugiura beat Goto to keep the GHC title, Tanahashi beat NOAH's Go Shiozaki, Naomichi Marufuji won the IWGP jr. heavyweight title from Tiger Mask, and Yujiro & Naito won the IWGP tag titles in a three-way over Team 3-D and Bernard & Anderson. There was also a legends match with Terry Funk & Choshu & Chono & Nakanishi over Abdullah the Butcher & Yano & Iizuka & Ishii.

On January 4, 2011, before 18,000, Tanahashi beat Kojima to win the IWGP title on top, plus Nakamura beat Shiozaki and TNA champ Jeff Hardy beat Naito. Bernard & Anderson kept the tag title in a three-way over Bobby Roode & James Storm and Nakanishi & Strongman. A match that is being rematched this year saw Prince Devitt retain the jr. title over Kota Ibushi. It was also the Tokyo Dome debut of Kazuchika Okada, who teamed with Goto, losing to Sugiura & Takayama.

On January 4, 2012, before 23,000, Tanahashi retained the IWGP title over Suzuki, and Muto beat Naito in the top two matches.

### **TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - January 4, 2013**

Wrestle Kingdom in Tokyo Dome - New Japan Pro Wrestling 29,000 paid  
 Wataru Inoue & Captain New Japan & Tama Tonga b Tomohiro Ishii & Yoshi-Hashi & Jado (\*3/4)  
 Kushida & Bushi & Ryusuke Taguchi b Jushin Liger & Tiger Mask & Hiromu Takahashi (\*\*1/2)  
 Akebono & Strongman & MVP & Manabu Nakanishi b Bob Sapp & Toru Yano & Takashi Iizuka & Yujiro Takahashi (\*1/4)  
 Never Open weight title: Masato Tanaka b Shelton Benjamin (\*\*3/4)  
 IWGP tag titles: Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr. b Hirooki Goto & Karl Anderson (\*\*\*1/2)  
 Yuji Nagata b Minoru Suzuki (\*\*\*\*)  
 IWGP jr. title: Prince Devitt retained over Low Ki and Kota Ibushi (\*\*\*\*1/2)  
 Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima b Keiji Muto & Shinjiro Otani (\*\*\*1/4)  
 Togi Makabe b Katsuyori Shibata (\*\*\*\*)  
 IC title: Shinsuke Nakamura b Kazushi Sakuraba (\*\*\*\*1/2)  
 IWGP title: Hiroshi Tanahashi b Kazuchika Okada (\*\*\*\*3/4)

Last year's show drew 35,000 fans, but that has to be made clear for comparison purposes that it was a paid number, and the numbers all previous years are total in the building. As far as paid went, you would probably have to go back to 2005 for a show at the same level. And inside the ring, it was probably the best of any of them. The promotion is nowhere near its heyday, but it appears going into its 43rd show at the Tokyo Dome, that things are starting to look up.

### **FINAL TOKYO DOME FLASHBACK - January 4, 2014**

Wrestle Kingdom in Tokyo Dome - New Japan Pro Wrestling 35,000 paid  
 1. Tomoaki Honma & Bushi & Captain New Japan & Hiroyoshi Tenzan beat Yohei Komatsu & Jushin Liger & Super Strong Machine & Manabu Nakanishi \*1/2  
 2. The Young Bucks, Matt & Nick Jackson, retained the IWGP jr. tag titles in a four-way over The Time Splitters (Alex Shelley & Kushida), The Forever Hooligans (Rocky Romero & Alex Koslov) and Taka Michinoku & Taichi \*\*\*1/4  
 3. Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows beat Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr. to win IWGP tag titles \*\*\*  
 4. Satoshi Kojima pinned Rob Conway to win the NWA heavyweight title \*\*  
 5. Yuji Nagata & Kazushi Sakuraba beat Rolles & Daniel Gracie via DQ -\*  
 6. Great Muta & Toru Yano beat Minoru Suzuki & Shelton Benjamin \*1/4  
 7. Togi Makabe beat Bad Luck Fale in the King of Destroyer match \*\*  
 8. Hirooki Goto pinned Katsuyori Shibata \*\*\*\*  
 9. Kota Ibushi pinned Prince Devitt to win the IWGP jr. title \*\*\*\*  
 10. Kazuchika Okada pinned Tetsuya Naito to retain the IWGP heavyweight title \*\*\*\*1/4  
 11. Hiroshi Tanahashi pinned Shinsuke Nakamura to win the IC title \*\*\*\*1/4

\*\*\*\*\*

### **JANUARY 4, 2016**

On 1/4, in what is in some ways the second biggest pro wrestling live event annually, New Japan Pro Wrestling's tradition becomes a quarter of a century old.

New Japan booked the first pro wrestling event at the Tokyo Dome on April 24, 1989. The show was built around the first real Russian athletes competing as professionals. The story got worldwide attention. The show itself was a mixture of a number of stories. A number of decorated Russian wrestlers and judokas were on the show, although the big ones hoped for, David Gobejishvili, who had won the gold medal the year before as a super heavyweight in freestyle wrestling in Seoul, South Korea, and Greco-Roman champion Alexander "the Experiment" Karelin, were not part of the crew.

Ironically, both did do pro wrestling in Japan later, Gobejishvili losing to Minoru Suzuki on a 1992 show at the Tokyo Dome for the Pro Wrestling Fujiwara Gumi promotion, and Karelin beating Akira Maeda in a 1999 show for RINGS.

The first show was headlined by Antonio Inoki, the era's biggest superstar, facing Shota Chochishvili, who captured the gold medal at 209 pounds in judo in 1972 and bronze in the open division in 1976, for Inoki's world martial arts championship. Dating back to 1976 and his win over 1972 Olympic super heavyweight judo gold medalist Willem Ruska, Inoki had done worked matches against stars from a number of fighting disciplines, always winning, making him a superhero. He also did one or two shoot matches during that period, most notable being the 1976 fight with Muhammad Ali. Many consider these fights the birth of MMA in Japan. The reality is they were all pro wrestling matches, except the Ali fight, which was supposed to be a pro wrestling match, but turned into a weird shoot to save the show because Ali at the last minute refused to do the job, and the whole idea of the fight was to get Inoki over, so he wasn't going to lose either.

Chochishvili won the match with a series of uranages leaving a shocked audience as Inoki was unable to continue. That match created the uranage as a big finisher in Japan, best remembered by Hiroshi Hase, and a trademark move in the U.S. years later.

When the night was over, Lou Thesz, one of Inoki's idols, came up to him, after the show drew 43,800 fans and Inoki put somebody over clean in the main event and said, "Antonio, tonight you became a businessman."

In actuality, Inoki's pick to be the guy he would lose his world martial arts title that he'd held for 13 years to was a bad one. The match didn't get over. Inoki beat him back for the title a month later in Osaka. Rather than make a new superstar foreigner, Chochishvili only had one more pro wrestling match, on a New Year's Eve show at the end of 1989 in Moscow, where 15,000 fans saw him team with Inoki to beat the team of an American and Japanese wrestling Olympian, Brad Rheingans & Masa Saito.

But the show had a lot of other elements to it. Salman Hashimikov, another Russian who had won world championships in freestyle wrestling in 1979, 1981, 1982 and 1983, debuted and beat Bam Bam Bigelow, one of the company's top foreign stars. Hashimikov one month later defeated Big Van Vader to win the IWGP title and remains one of the few foreigners ever to hold that title. Another Russian, Victor Zangiev, who ended up as the most impressive of the group, became the prototype of a legendary character, Zangief, in the Street Fighter video game series.

Keiichi Yamada, a 5-foot-4 ½ bodybuilder type who emulated the Dynamite Kid, was given a cartoon costume to become the next Tiger Mask, called Jushin "Thunder" Liger. One can make a strong case, given his longevity, that Liger, who quickly became one of the world's elite wrestlers, ended up being the greatest junior heavyweight in pro wrestling history. Thesz, as an ode to the past, was the referee for an IWGP tag team title match. Vader won a one-night tournament to capture the IWGP heavyweight title. And there was even a match with Benny "the Jet" Urquidez, a kickboxing legend of the 70s.

New Japan promoted annually at the Dome from that point on, but on no specific day. On January 4, 1992, a show called "Super Warriors in Tokyo Dome," drew 50,000 fans paying \$3,700,000, the latter figure breaking the all-time gate record at the time set by the Hulk Hogan vs. Ultimate Warrior match at Sky Dome in Toronto.

It was a loaded show, which was broadcast on PPV, on a tape delay, into the U.S. by WCW, which was New Japan's business partner at the time. Riki Choshu pinned Tatsumi Fujinami to win the IWGP title in the main event, while Lex Luger pinned Masahiro Chono to retain the WCW title, Sting & Great Muta beat Rick & Scott Steiner and Inoki beat Hase.

Very quickly, January 4th became "Wrestling Day" in Japan. The week after New Year's was always big. Culturally, New Year's in Japan is bigger than Christmas when it comes to presents, so all the promotions used to load up on big shows that week long before it became the Dome tradition.

While in the promotion's heyday, they sometimes had as many as three Tokyo Dome shows in a year, the 1/4 show was always the primary show, and for years after New Japan had fallen from its peak, the 1/4 show continued to either sell out, or come close to it.

The decline of New Japan can probably be traced to 1999 and 2000, coinciding with the rise of Pride. The key is that when Choshu had his retirement show on January 4, 1998, drawing a sellout of 55,000 fans, he made it clear that it was his real retirement, although it probably never was going to be given that isn't now 18 years later, and he's 64, and still wrestling. But when he retired, he said he would only come back if business got bad and it was necessary. While Choshu did a gimmick coming out of retirement match with Atsushi Onita in 2000, he came back on the January 4, 2001 show at the Tokyo Dome, which was a public key that things weren't doing well.

It's notable that from the 1992 show through the 2002 show, only one event, the 1994 show, failed to sell out, but it was only a few thousand shy, so it was like several of the WrestleManias in recent years. And that had a loaded lineup, headlined by Inoki vs. Genichiro Tenryu in a battle of legends, plus Hashimoto vs. Chono, Choshu vs. Yoshiaki Fujiwara (an 80s feud revisited), Hulk Hogan vs. Fujinami, the Steiner Brothers vs. Keiji Muto & Hase, The Hell Raisers (Road Warrior Hawk & Kensuke Sasaki as Power Warrior) vs. The Jurassic Powers (Scott Norton & Hercules Hernandez) and Liger vs. Tiger Mask (this time played by Koji Kanemoto).

Other years, the company was on fire. In 1996, they had just come off an October Muto vs. Nobuhiko Takada match which was the biggest match in company history, as New Japan's champion (Muto) faced the top star of the rival UWFI, setting the pro wrestling record at the time with a \$6.1 million gate. The rematch, where Takada won the IWGP title (setting up a third Dome sellout in April with Hashimoto going after the title) was also an easy sellout with a Dome show that only included one American, Big Van Vader, who lost to Inoki in what was Inoki's last true classic match.

The show continued to sell out the next few years simply based on it being the biggest show of the year, with the big IWGP title match of the year, Hashimoto vs. Choshu in 1997, Sasaki vs. Muto in 1998, Muto vs. Norton in 1999 and Sasaki vs. Tenryu in 2000.

In 2001, it was a big one. Pro Wrestling NOAH had formed in 2000, with almost every star from All Japan leaving. Toshiaki Kawada was the only All Japan star who stayed, and to stay in business, Motoko Baba went to New Japan for help, creating a joint promotional rivalry that boosted business for both sides. On October 9, 2000, a special Dome show was booked where Kawada beat IWGP champion Sasaki. In losing to an outsider, Sasaki vacated his title.

So the Dome show was built around a tournament with Sasaki, Satoshi Kojima, Yuji Nagata, Hirooyoshi Tenzan, Chono and Kawada, where Sasaki (who had earlier beaten Kojima and Chono) defeated Kawada in the finals, a result that could be very much questioned.

The success of the Dome show has had its ups and downs, largely based on the health of the company. Until the 2002 show, where a dream match of Mitsuharu Misawa vs. Chono going to a 30:00 draw drew 47,000 fans, every show was either sold out or almost packed. But things got bad from there, with papered crowds that sometimes only did 10,000 paid. One year, things got so bad that fans protested by throwing away their papered tickets and not coming.

It's only in recent years that there has been a turnaround, notably when the 2013 show, headlined by IWGP champion Hiroshi Tanahashi and top rival Kazuchika Okada, drew 29,000 fans.

Little has been said about the advance for this year's show. Last year at this time there was talk that with a little luck, they were going to nearly fill the building for the first time in 13 years. They didn't have the luck, although Wrestle Kingdom 9 drew 36,000 fans and the best gate since that period, featuring the same main event, where Tanahashi once again retained the IWGP title over Okada.

This year, there has just been vague words that sales are good and that the floor (7,000 seats) sold out quickly. Aside from the expensive tickets, only one other price range, the \$47 tickets, had sold out as of a week ago.

Things were going down in New Japan by 2002. But the Dome staved off the problems by booking the Misawa vs. Chono match and getting one more nearly full house. An interesting generational battle was third from the top, as the Steiners, top foreign stars from a decade earlier, faced Sasaki and a partner in his first important Dome match, Hiroshi Tanahashi, who would be the guy to lead the revival a decade later, with Joanie Laurer (Chyna) as referee.

By 2003, they went with IWGP champion Nagata against Josh Barnett on top. Barnett had been the UFC heavyweight champion, beating Randy Couture the previous year, but was stripped of his title for testing positive for steroids and then left the promotion after a financial dispute. A huge fan of Japanese wrestling and culture growing up, Barnett was willing to lose in exchange for being taught pro wrestling. By 2004, even with a 17-match show, Bob Sapp in his heyday and the retirement of Fujinami (who is also still wrestling now, more than a decade later), it was the heavy papering period, which continued for years.

While the 2005 show is listed as drawing 46,000 fans, headlined by a main event of young stars, Tanahashi losing to Shinsuke Nakamura, the reality was nowhere close and for the next several years the real paid attendance was in the 10,000 to 12,000 range. By 2007, the first

show called "Wrestle Kingdom," where Muto & Chono were brought back as a tag team to beat Kojima & Tenzan, while Tanahashi beat All Japan's Taiyo Kea, things were so bad that they were considering dropping the Dome show from the schedule.

Wrestle Kingdom III, where Tanahashi regained the IWGP title from "outsider" Muto of All Japan, and Nakamura & Hirooki Goto beat Misawa & Takashi Sugiura, got the crowd up to 27,500. But in 2010, a double main event with Nakamura keeping the IWGP title over Yoshihiro Takayama and Sugiura keeping the GHC title over Goto, plus bringing in Terry Funk and Abdullah the Butcher, All Japan legends of the 70s and 80s, saw the crowd fall to 20,000.

The next year it was down to 18,000 with Tanahashi beating "outsider" Kojima to win back the IWGP title, and plenty of outsiders from NOAH (Go Shiozaki, Takashi Sugiura), Zero-One (Masato Tanaka), TNA (Jeff Hardy, Rob Van Dam, James Storm and Bobby Roode) and CMLL (La Sombra, Mascara Dorada and Hector Garza). That show also featured a singles match where Prince Devitt (Finn Balor) regained his IWGP jr. title over Ibushi.

A Tanahashi vs. Suzuki IWGP title match in 2012 got the crowd to 23,000, and it started a year where business doubled overall.

By 2013, an absolutely incredible show featuring the first Tanahashi vs. Okada match, an incredible Nakamura vs. Sakuraba match, plus Makabe vs. Shibata, Tenzan & Kojima vs. Muto & Shinjiro Otani (former New Japan star who was a top star in Zero-One), Devitt vs. Low Ki vs. Ibushi for the jr. title, Nagata vs. Suzuki and even an opener where Sapp and Akebono were on opposite sides of an eight-man bid 29,000. The last two years have gotten the crowds up to 35,000 and 36,000.

Last year's show also had the most worldwide interest perhaps ever, but certainly since the glory days of the promotion, due to it airing live on PPV in North America in a partnership with Jeff Jarrett's Global Force Wrestling. The show, heavily pushed as having the best action you would see all year, and with the return of Jim Ross as the announcer, did 15,000 buys on North American PPV, a number that beat every ROH and TNA show. And while the circumstances are very different given the streaming network, it wasn't that far off several WWE shows. That's with the show being available for streaming off the New Japan World site, although unlike with WWE, that wasn't much of a factor as there were probably only 2,000 to 3,000 New Japan World subscribers outside of Japan by that time.

Even with that, there is no PPV for the show this year. In some ways it would be more difficult, given the show is late Sunday night/Monday morning (3 a.m. Eastern; midnight Pacific, likely for close to five hours is the listed start time but it will probably start 45 minutes earlier with the Rumble match as the equivalent of the pre-show match) instead of Saturday night/Sunday morning, which also allowed for a prime time Sunday night replay in the traditional wrestling time slot. But last year was also hampered. Many companies didn't air it live, instead opting to replay the much bigger UFC event. Others didn't air the replay on Sunday night, when the expectation was you'd get the bulk of the viewers.

On the flip side, New Japan is significantly more popular in the U.S. than a year ago due to World Pro Wrestling Returns airing on Friday nights on AXS, as well as several appearances of New Japan stars on ROH programming. A promotional partnership with ROH pushing the show on its TV's after Final Battle in exchange for being partners, and working out a deal with AXS for promotion, would have led to more interest, probably enough to offset the less fortunate time slot. Jim Ross had also made it clear he was more than up to do it again.

But New Japan, as it often does, is copying the WWE's business plan and pushing its streaming service as the only way to watch the show. New Japan World is, with the current exchange rates, only \$8.30 per month. The negative is that unless you are bound and determined to order it, navigation through a Japanese sign-up page isn't the easiest. I know of many people who decided they had to get the channel and signed up. I know far more who wanted to get it and felt it wasn't worth the hassle. The bottom line is that, while this may change in five years,

right now the potential audience for a show on iPPV in the U.S. and regular PPV is substantially lower, as is the price point. At a time when interest is the highest, New Japan is largely squandering the vast majority of revenue it could derive from the U.S. market. Still, New Japan is flying in Kevin Kelly and Matt Striker to do the broadcast as well as of the Korakuen Hall show the next day, and hiring Yoshi Tatsu to work with them.

A plus to this year's show is that last year they had a very specific time limit of four hours because of the U.S. PPV, which meant a lot of the undercard matches were kept short. It wasn't a big negative, because the last seven matches were as good as last seven matches as you'll ever see, and they still had 31:00 for Tanahashi and Okada and ended the show with plenty of time to spare.

The show is strong on paper, even if the third Tanahashi vs. Okada Dome main event in four years (although their first singles match since last year's show) is hardly fresh. The only change from the original lineup is that due to Kota Ibushi's neck issues, he's out. It appeared they were grooming him for Kazushi Sakuraba, who is not advertised for the show at all. Originally he was going to do the 12/29 Rizin main event and the Dome show, and it's still possible he'll do the Rumble match.

\*New Japan Rumble. This will be a combination of the regulars not booked on the main card, such as Jushin Liger, Tiger Mask, Jay White, Ryusuke Taguchi, Evil, Bushi, Mascara Dorada, David Finlay, Yohei Komatsu, Sho Tanaka, Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Satoshi Kojima, Juice Robinson, Yuji Nagata, Manabu Nakanishi and Captain New Japan, perhaps the new rookies that debut the night before (Kanemitsu Teruaki and Kawato Hirai), and surprises and legends from the past.

\*Bobby Fish & Kyle O'Reilly defend the IWGP jr. tag titles against The Young Bucks, Matt Sydal & Ricochet and Rocky Romero & Trent Baretta. This is the third straight year the main show will open with the high spot match with the Young Bucks and Romero being in all three. From a talent standpoint, due to adding Sydal & Ricochet to the already strong mix, on paper this is the strongest thus far. It's often a tough crowd for early matches at the Dome due to casual fans who come to see the biggest stars. But this is also the biggest match, in terms of being on such a huge event, for all eight of these wrestlers in 2016.

\*Mark & Jay Briscoe & Toru Yano vs. Bad Luck Fale & Tama Tonga & Yujiro Takahashi for the creation of the Never trios championships. Given the promotion already has too many titles, this is both needless and something of a filler. Plus, even if the title gets defended on big shows in 2016, it becomes an undercard championship. The Bullet Club team are the regulars and thus, the favorites here. But it's possible that New Japan booker Gedo wants to get the Briscoes over since they are a unique act, in which case the result could be different.

\*Jay Lethal vs. Michael Elgin for the ROH title. Lethal is making his New Japan debut here. Elgin has in a short period of time become an established favorite in this promotion. As far as who goes over, that's going to be determined by what is best for ROH. There are a lot of moving parts when it comes to the ROH title picture in 2016 based on who is staying and who is going. The match technically will probably be very good, and would probably kill at Korakuen Hall. The question is with a mass audience, how much they will care about a match with two Americans, one of which they don't really even know, battling for an American championship. There is something to be said for the idea of changing the ROH title before 35,000 fans in Tokyo as far as making the title feel more major league.

\*Kenny Omega vs. Kushida for the IWGP jr. heavyweight title. Omega first won the title last year at the Dome. He then lost it and regained it in matches with Kushida. Omega is an incredible talent, but is sometimes prone to overacting. Kushida is one of the best wrestlers in the world. The match should be great. The two have bounced the title around this year and it seems like the time and place to bounce it to Kushida.

\*Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows vs. Togi Makabe & Tomoaki Honma for the IWGP tag team titles. Anderson & Gallows first won the title two

years ago at the Dome over Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr. They held the belts for the entire year, dropping them at the Dome to Katsuyori Shibata & Hirooki Goto. This year, they regained the belts from Shibata & Goto, traded them with Michael Bennett & Matt Taven, and ended the year as champions again. Honma has the ability to really get a crowd going. The tag titles here aren't as big as they've been in the past.

\*Hirooki Goto vs. Tetsuya Naito. This is a grudge match from some incidents that have taken place on recent shows. The winner of this match is likely getting the next IWGP title match with Naito the one most likely as he's the one on the rise with the heel turn. Outside interference from Evil and Bushi is likely here.

\*Tomohiro Ishii vs. Katsuyori Shibata for the Never Open weight title. These two bring a style and intensity made for each other. It could easily end up as the best match on the show, and will almost surely be the hardest hitting. Shibata hasn't won a singles title in a long New Japan career and he's long overdue. It feels like this is both the time and place.

\*Shinsuke Nakamura vs. A.J. Styles for the IC title. Nakamura has been on every 1/4 Dome show since his rookie year of 2003 and has one of the widest range of unique opponents from different eras and worlds in his singles matches, from MMA fighter and kickboxer Jan "The Giant" Nortje, twice with Yoshihiro Takayama, former giant celebrity Bob Sapp, three main events with Tanahashi, Brock Lesnar, 90s legend Toshiaki Kawada, Go Shiozaki, Kazushi Sakuraba and Kota Ibushi. This is Styles' third Tokyo Dome match, and the first time he's been this high on the show. It's a virtual lock that they are going to have a good match as these are two of the best big match wrestlers of the past decade. Styles obviously has his physical issues, and is also likely to overcome them on such a big show. If he can't, it would be a sign things are a lot worse than is being let on. When the match was first booked, I was expecting a Styles title win since that's the right thing for business. But that now depends how his health and how the injuries affect his wrestling.

\*Kazuchika Okada vs. Hiroshi Tanahashi for the IWGP heavyweight title. The match is almost a lock to be great. These two had one of this year's best matches at the Dome. The question if this is going to the well too often. Even the greatest in-ring feuds in history passed their peak and went down as far as public interest is concerned. Tanahashi will set the all-time record with his 10th Tokyo Dome main event, something no wrestler or other combat sports athlete has ever done. Tanahashi has had a singles match on every Wrestle Kingdom show and has won the last seven years, six being title matches. Tanahashi pinned Okada in their previous Dome matches, a 33:34 title retention in 2013 and a 30:57 retention last year. But this time Tanahashi, the G-1 Climax winner, comes in as challenger. When he's on a big show on top, Tanahashi may still be the best wrestler in the business. Even if he's not due to his neck, knees and back injuries, Okada is very clearly on that short list. But they have to compete with themselves, and a series of match of the year candidates, as well as follow people in the prior matches looking to steal the show. This had already established itself going into last year's show as one of the great rivalries in pro wrestling history, and now they have to live up to that categorization.

## BIG FOUR TOKYO DOME RECORDS

### TANAHASHI

**10/8/01:** w/Kenzo Suzuki & Yutaka Yoshie & Wataru Inoue lost a four-on-two handicap match to Giant Singh (Great Khail) & Giant Silva in second match

**1/4/02:** w/Kenzo Suzuki lost to Kazunari Murakami & Yuki Ishikawa in third match

**5/2/02:** w/Kensuke Sasaki lost to Rick & Scott Steiner third from the top

**10/14/02:** w/Kenzo Suzuki def. Shinya (Togi) Makabe & Minoru Fujita in 31 seconds but had an immediate rematch that Makabe & Fujita won midcard

**10/13/03:** w/Hiro Yoshi Tenzan & Yuji Nagata & Manabu Nakanishi & Seiji Sakaguchi lost to Yoshihiro Takayama & Kazuyuki Fujita & Minoru Suzuki & Shinsuke Nakamura main event

**1/4/04:** def. Yutaka Yoshie to retain the Under-30 championship mid card match

**5/3/04:** def. Sean O'Haire third from the top

**1/4/05:** lost to Shinsuke Nakamura to lose Under-30 championship main event

**5/14/05:** w/Shinsuke Nakamura def. Manabu Nakanishi & Kendo Ka Shin to retain IWGP tag titles third from the top

**10/8/05:** w/Shinsuke Nakamura def. Toshiaki Kawada & Yoji Anjo second from the top

**1/4/06:** lost to Katsuyori Shibata fourth from the top

**1/4/07:** def. Taiyo Kea to retain IWGP title second from the top

**1/4/08:** lost IWGP title to Shinsuke Nakamura main event

**1/4/09:** def. Keiji Muto to win IWGP title main event

**1/4/10:** def. Go Shiozaki third from the top

**1/4/11:** def. Satoshi Kojima to win IWGP title main event

**1/4/12:** def. Minoru Suzuki to retain IWGP title main event

**1/4/13:** def. Kazuchika Okada to retain IWGP title main event

**1/4/14:** def. Shinsuke Nakamura to win IC title main event

**1/5/15:** def. Kazuchika Okada to retain IWGP title main event

### OKADA

**1/4/11:** w/Hirooki Goto lost to Takashi Sugiura & Yoshihiro Takayama fifth from top

**1/4/12:** def. Yoshi-Hashi mid card

**1/4/13:** lost to Hiroshi Tanahashi in IWGP title match main event

**1/4/14:** def. Tetsuya Naito win retain IWGP title second from the top

**1/4/15:** lost to Hiroshi Tanahashi in IWGP title match main event

### NAKAMURA

**1/4/03:** w/Michiyoshi Ohara def. Tadao Yasuda & Kazunari Murakami fourth from the top

**5/2/03:** def. Jan "The Giant" Nortje in MMA rules legitimate shoot match midcard

**10/13/03:** w/Yoshihiro Takayama & Kazuyuki Fujita & Minoru Suzuki & Bob Sapp def. Hiro Yoshi Tenzan & Yuji Nagata & Manabu Nakanishi & Hiroshi Tanahashi & Seiji Sakaguchi in elimination match main event

**1/4/04:** def. Yoshihiro Takayama to unify the IWGP and NWF world titles in main event

**5/3/04:** lost to Bob Sapp in IWGP title match main event

**1/4/05:** def. Hiroshi Tanahashi to win Under-30 title main event

**5/14/05:** w/Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Manabu Nakanishi & Kendo Ka Shin to retain IWGP tag titles third from the top

**10/8/05:** w/Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Toshiaki Kawada & Yoji Anjo second from the top

**1/4/06:** lost to IWGP champion Brock Lesnar main event

**1/4/07:** lost to Toshiaki Kawada fourth from the top

**1/4/08:** def. Hiroshi Tanahashi to win IWGP title main event

**1/4/09:** w/Hirooki Goto def. Mitsuharu Misawa & Takashi Sugiura second from the top

**1/4/10:** def. Yoshihiro Takayama to retain IWGP title main event

**1/4/11:** def. Go Shiozaki third from top

**1/4/12:** w/Toru Yano lost to Go Shiozaki & Naomichi Marufuji third from top

**1/4/13:** def. Kazushi Sakuraba to retain IC title second from the top

**1/4/14:** lost IC title to Hiroshi Tanahashi main event

**1/4/15:** def. Kota Ibushi to retain IC title second from the top

### STYLES

**1/4/08:** w/Christian Cage & Petey Williams def. Milano Collection A.T. & Minoru (Tanaka) & Prince Devitt (Finn Balor) opening match

**1/4/15:** def. Tetsuya Naito third from the top